

MANAGING YOUR OWN INTEGRATION

Current trends in Dutch health and welfare policies aim to make the reintegration process “demand-driven” rather than “supply-directed” and so the emphasis is now on individuals assuming more responsibility. However, if people with disabilities are to steer their own reintegration, it is vitally important that the skills and knowledge required for this process are developed to the highest possible level, in the light of each individual’s abilities and aptitudes.

“The effects of non-discrimination legislation depend on the ability of individuals to exercise their rights,” says Eduard Schoevaars from the National Disability Council which is one of the main partners in a nationwide Development Partnership (DP) called [Vrijbaan](#). He also stresses that *“empowerment is not only indispensable for successful reintegration into employment but is also decisive in the full exercise of citizenship”*.



MEASURING AND DEVELOPING EMPOWERMENT

Vrijbaan is attempting to overturn the more traditional and well-meaning approaches to integration by boosting the empowerment of people with disabilities. It has pioneered a new way of measuring the degree of empowerment of people with disabilities, which can then be used to design the best possible training pathways for those who are at the greatest distance from the labour market.

Despite the lack of any promotional activity and practically no media coverage, the DP is attracting a lot of attention in the Netherlands and not only from training agencies. A major pension fund is investigating whether the diagnostic instrument that it has developed can be used to get people, who have retired early on health grounds, back into work, and occupational health physicians are also using the tool to discover if the level of empowerment is lower amongst people who are frequently absent from work. These physicians want to find out if strengthening someone’s empowerment helps to prevent him or her being excluded from the labour market.

This instrument is essentially a questionnaire containing 60 statements and respondents are asked to express the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each statement. The six components covered are:

- **Competence:** *trusting in your own abilities;*
- **Self-Determination:** *being able to make choices and feeling in control of your own situation;*
- **Impact:** *engendering change in your own environment;*
- **Significance:** *experiencing a meaning in your activities that fits with your own values;*
- **Group-Oriented:** *realising that you are part of a community or group and that you need support from this group; and*
- **Positive Identity:** *accepting your disability in a realistic way and understanding that it does not control your life.*

A psychologist analyses the responses and together with the respondent discusses the particular components that are not as well developed as they might be. If that person expresses his or her commitment, an individual training pathway is then established.

Apart from the diagnostic instrument, the DP has also produced a number of aids to help other bodies develop an empowerment orientation in their work. These include a publication explaining the six components of the instrument, criteria and a handbook to help trainers and coaches develop empowering attitudes, and a manual on empowerment training.

Vrijbaan hopes that these other training agencies will be influenced by the initial results of its empowerment activities, which have proved to be very positive and have increased the participants' self-confidence and self-image. For example, Aukje Hendrix from Heerlen had problems in walking and also had to overcome the consequences of a minor stroke. She had been an enthusiastic worker in the care sector but now had to find another occupation. After her training she felt that *"I learned that I am allowed to be the person I am. I'm allowed to make mistakes! This means that I feel much more secure and that has a positive influence on all aspects of life!"* Peer van Halderen, a 49 year old man with a visual disability, was following the same training course in his attempts to get back into a job. He said *"I thought I had an insight into myself and knew how things worked but the results of some of the training were a real revelation to me."* Such new-found security and self-awareness have also given people more control over their own lives. Lia Hesdahl lives in Maastricht and she suffers from panic attacks which had seriously undermined her self confidence but now she believes that, *"I want to become even stronger in what I have learned. I now have a real focus while before I used to be very indecisive and get in a muddle about everything."*



Jos Verhoeve, Director of the Start Foundation which co-funds Vrijbaan, interviews a participant in the Empowerment Training

INNOVATION - FROM IDEAS TO ACTION

PLANNING FOR AN INNOVATIVE PROJECT

Indeed when the project started, the situation regarding empowerment was also in a bit of a muddle. Everyone had his or her ideas about what empowerment was and while a number of the reintegration centres and other disability organisations in the Netherlands were running empowerment courses, there was no common curriculum. So, the DP tried to introduce some structure by creating a staged work programme that would attempt to find the answers to how can empowerment be defined, be measured and be strengthened?

The composition of the partnership had been carefully designed so that the DP stood the best possible chance of interpreting and promoting empowerment. In addition to the four Reintegration Centres that originally proposed the project, the DP comprises a local interest group of people with disabilities and the National Disability Council, which advises central government on disability issues. The final partner is the Centre of Expertise on Disability, which is linked to the University of Maastricht and provides credibility for the DP's outcomes. In addition, the DP also has an Advisory Council that comprises other Universities, the Chair of the National Disability Council and a representative of the Central Body for the Executive Organisation of Social Security. The main function of this Council is to continually review the activities of the DP and advise on its strategic positioning.

DEVELOPING NOVEL METHODS AND TOOLS

The Centre of Expertise on Disability led the first stage of the DP's scientific approach. It developed a concept of empowerment through a literature search and in-depth interviews with clients and practitioners on motivation and assessment of new needs which were analysed using the grounded theory method. The search came up with the four components of competence, self-determination, impact and significance while the interviews produced the 'new' components of group orientation and positive identity.

Having defined the components, the next stage was to create an instrument that could measure an individual's level of attainment in each of these components. This instrument was based on a number of different measurement tools that had already be validated and used in the Netherlands. The final instrument, in the form of a questionnaire, was applied to a group of over 400 people with disabilities who had either found work or were coming towards the end of their reintegration process. The purpose of this exercise was to determine the score levels for each

component that individuals should either have, or attain, if they were to make a successful transition to employment.

The last stage was the establishing of a training system to counteract any empowerment “weaknesses” that might be detected by the diagnostic instrument. Essentially this involved the dismantling the uncoordinated training provision and then rebuilding the resulting bricks of experience, materials and resources into 30 different modules per component that could be used to address any empowerment deficiencies. These training new modules have been undertaken by 102 people throughout the country and the final project evaluation has shown that the vast majority felt that their empowerment had been strengthened and that they were now in a better position to present themselves for employment and to promote their skills and abilities. The DP’s work in designing, developing and testing new products has finally led to a more complete definition of empowerment that is becoming commonly accepted, a tool to measure empowerment and 180 training modules to strengthen empowerment.

PROMOTING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

All of these activities have taken time to come to fruition. *“We had to work for almost six months to convince people about the opportunities for experimentation that EQUAL offers and of the value of testing different, non-traditional approaches”* explained Tessa Zaeyen, the project manager, *“this was particularly true for those professionals who had been taught at university that empowerment requires an holistic approach, and that it can’t be separated into different components.”* Now towards the end of the project, things are very different and members of staff of the institutions and organisations associated with the DP have become caught up in the culture of experimentation and innovation. As Tessa reports, *“they are now making demands on their bosses for extra training and development so that they are in a position to respond to the more imaginative and creative reintegration plans that have been established by those clients who have taken part in the empowerment training!”*



Annemarieke Meelker

Innovation and staff development seem to be inextricably linked in Vrijbaan and this combination has also permeated the project’s transnational partnership. This cross-border cooperation involved the application of the diagnostic instrument to different target groups and a total of 360 people in three other countries, the joint production of a pack of empowerment resources and two winter schools for training the trainers in empowerment. Annemarieke Meelker who was in charge of the team that developed the VrijBaan empowerment-strengthening training has benefited from these activities. She believes that *“It strengthens one’s self confidence to meet people from other Member States, to express yourself in a foreign language and to transmit to others what inspires you. Transferring your own way of working almost automatically makes clear what its stronger and weaker points are.”*

NEW POLICY INITIATIVES TO BE TAKEN

There is however room for further innovation in policy and practice in the Netherlands and one aspect of this relates to the timing of empowerment strengthening activities and their financing after EQUAL. There is now a policy initiative in the Netherlands called *Individuele Reïntegratie Overeenkomst* or “Individual Reintegration Agreement” that provides finance to people with disabilities to buy in the services that they need. They could, in fact, use this agreement to buy in empowerment training but Tessa Zaeyen says that *“this would be like shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted, as people need such training before they make the agreement so that they can appraise and make the choices which are involved.”* Similarly, it is difficult to fit empowerment training into existing training offers for people with disabilities. The task of the training centres is to make sure that the students get a diploma at the end of their training. To get that diploma a student needs to be trained in different competences and the time and money which is available is devoted to training in these competences. However, the DP believes that once empowerment is recognised as being crucial to the process of directing your own reintegration process, training related to it will become part of the regular vocational training to

which students are entitled. The change that is necessary will require amendments to the policies of central government and the project's partners will continue to lobby for such modifications.

However, some of the partners are in a position to directly influence a second change that is required. The feeling grew during the work of the DP that key actors and services in the reintegration process can be the biggest blockage to empowerment, as they often take decisions and action on behalf of people with disabilities without involving or consulting them. Thus, it was decided that it was not enough simply to offer empowerment training to people with disabilities, it was also necessary to train professional members of staff in creating an empowering environment that can stimulate and strengthen empowerment amongst their clients. This will take place through another EQUAL DP entitled [REQUEST](#) that has been selected during the second call for applications. The fact that this new partnership involves, amongst others, two major social security bodies, the CWI (Centre for Work and Income) and UWV (Employers' Insurance Implementing Organisation), is an important testimony to the legacy of innovation that Vrijbaan will leave behind in terms of its clear definition of empowerment, an effective diagnostic instrument and high-quality training provision.

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Link to [EQUAL database description](#)

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